

## Everybody Seems to Know What is Happening, Except Me

The bus arrives an hour early. I take the night bus from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son in the hope that I will be able to sleep through the winding hills and valleys. We are given blankets to assist us in this, but any chance of sleep is scuppered by the driver's refusal to switch off the air-conditioning.

Mae Hong Son is less cold than the bus, but Mae Hong Son is closed. It's five o'clock in the morning and I have five hours to investigate all the city has to offer. I walk up the main road. I walk back, alone save for the street sweeper and the ubiquitous stray dogs. Ten minutes later I have finished exploring the city and am back at the bus station.

Benjamin picks me up at the bus station, pulling in on a misfiring motorcycle. I have a backpack and carry a small case in my hands. He grabs the case.

-I put in here.

Between the seat-front and the frame of the bike. The case is clearly too big, one corner wedged in and ninety percent of the case hanging in mid-air. We start to move and the case comes flying off and slides under a bus.

-Oh!

Genuine surprise on Benjamin's face. He cuts the engine as I get off to retrieve the case.

-It's ok,

he says as I crawl under the bus. I pull out the case and brush off the dirt. As a matter of fact it is okay. I'm about to suggest that I carry the case on my lap, but he takes it and wedges it again. He turns the key, the engine whines but does not start; two, three times, then it splutters into life. I look at my case with grave misgivings as we start to move, but this time it holds fast. Gravity, like many things, is no match for Benjamin's belief.

The village is about an hour's drive so I settle back to enjoy the scenery. A minute later we stop at the market. A yellow *songtaew* is about to leave and Benjamin shouts at the driver as he pulls up alongside. He turns to me,

-You go now. I'll come later.

I say "okay" and grab my luggage.

-My daughter will meet you at the village.

-Does the driver know where to drop me?

I have visions of standing on a deserted roadside under a baking sun.

-Of course! He is the chief of my village.

In the quiet mid-morning I share this *songtaew* with a young mother and her infant clutching a battered and pod-less Thunderbird 2 model, and an old woman transporting sacks of seed. During the journey a trainee monk and a teenage girl join us. It's a quiet trip, the noise precludes conversation. Off the main road we head for the hinterland. The draught is pleasant, but as our speed slows on the hills, the smell from the exhaust becomes more apparent. We go through a couple of small settlements. After about an hour we enter a slightly larger village. We pass a small school – the children playing on the fields run over to wave as we drive past. A little

further on the *songtaew* stops. The young mother, who has hitherto said nothing, looks at me and points.

-You go here!

I climb down and look around. There are some rough steps – forced into rather than carved out of the earth. An archway frames the entrance and bears a sign – Tomato Village...support by Child's Dream. The sign is facing uphill and cannot be seen coming from Mae Hong Son.

A young girl skips down the steps, humming, alerted by the noise of the *songtaew*. She smiles.

-Good morning!

-Hi,

I reply as she grabs my bag.

-You are Benjamin's daughter, right?

-Yes. I am [her voice is suddenly drowned out by dogs barking]...You can call me Sang.

We walk up the steps and I see that the first building is in fact a small, open classroom. Behind are several more buildings including a two-storey house; their home.

There are three small huts for volunteers. One hut is locked, the second has a double mattress filling its floor space, the third a single mattress next to a squatting toilet. I take the second one. It also has an electric light above the mattress which is a pleasant surprise. I had brought four candles and a carton of eight boxes of matches. I drop my bags and we go into the house.

On the balcony is a low table surrounded by mats. On the table are insulated jugs, glasses, and tea and coffee and sugar. This is the social hub of the home.

-Do you want tea, coffee?

-Er, coffee please.

Sang puts two large teaspoons of sugar into a large glass and passes it to me.

-You put how much coffee you want.

I don't usually take sugar in drinks. I compensate by measuring out a large helping of coffee and Sang adds water from a jug. It tastes good. Since then I always take sugar in my Tomato Village coffee.

Sang is chatty; open, I assume, from being used to having foreign volunteers around. I have many questions but need not ask them; Sang answers most of them in telling me about the school. All her statements carry with them a smile, most of them a laugh, too. She tells me she teaches C class – the young learners. I imagine her infectious nature carries her a long way with them.

Later I go for a walk around the village. It's hot and dusty, and there is not much to look at: similarly-constructed wood and bamboo huts on plots carved out of the hill. And some satellite TV dishes! But no hot water apparently.

My stomach has been rumbling for hours and I return to find dinner being prepared.

-Not spicy! I know volunteers don't like spicy.

I smile and sit down to rice and beans. And more rice. It's a little different from Thai food (rice, excepted) and provides a nice change.

The cellphone rings. It's Benjamin. He's stranded. The spluttering motorcycle is indisposed; it needs a new clutch. Sang leaves to collect one from the garage and take it to him. I finish my dinner alone.

Schedules are less apparent in this place. Here, nobody seems to wear a watch. Time is set by a combination of the movements of the sun and the changing of television programmes. In my parallel world I glance at my watch ever more frequently as we inch towards six o'clock; in so doing, distinguishing myself as a *farang* in the space we mutually inhabit.

The noise of the children running around outside gets louder, perhaps subconsciously they are making the most of the last few moments of freedom. A bell rings out and they fall silent. For the briefest of moments I am suddenly aware how still it is up here as the silence is rent by the shrillness of the bell.

Six o'clock. I am alone amid three classes of children. They sit, expectantly; they know what is supposed to happen now, but I am lost. Benjamin and his daughter haven't returned, his wife doesn't speak English or Thai; I don't even know which class, course, or book I am to teach. Benjamin's wife takes care of the young ones; I enter the big classroom.

It houses two classes – A and B – separated by curtains more symbolic than practical.

-Good evening, Teacher!

-Er...hello!

The register is on the table. It is combined – A and B classes, twenty-nine names but no marker between the classes.

-Are you class A or B?

-Beeeeeeee, teacher!

I look at the register. Where does A end and B begin? I think of asking a student but they cannot recognize the English transliterations. I resolve to start calling names from the bottom of the list, upwards.

I have no hope of pronouncing the names right. Even written in the Roman alphabet they are a mystery to me – an assortment of Shan, Karen, Burman and Hmong names melted seamlessly in A to Z. Fortunately, I know this, so decide to make a deliberate joke of it.

-Soyee Marhk?

Silence. A joke? Bad idea! I decide to try and say the name properly, after all.

-Soi Mak?

Confused looks. Finally comprehension dawns on the face of one student. One bright, young thing.

-Soi Mak!

(Isn't that what I said?) Group laughter.

-He no come.

We continue: me stumbling over unfamiliar consonant clusters and absent vowels – occasionally turning the register upside down, the students alternating between correction and laughter.

Torn between wanting to stretch things out until Benjamin's return and a desire to appear not completely incompetent, I set up a tried and trusted adjectives game

involving a version of pass the parcel, running and blackboard writing to which the children add shouting and groaning as the competition between the teams becomes more intense. After a couple of turns they have the hang of the game and, placing one of the more astute boys in charge, I leave them to it and head around the curtain.

Class A have organized themselves. Seven girls (the only boy in the class arrives late) seated neatly, vaguely corresponding to their ages – eleven to twenty-one. One girl with distinctive features (I discover later that she is half-Thai) is by the blackboard, chalk in hand, leading a word game. They're engaging with each other quite freely. It looks fun; I want to play, too! The girl by the board sees me, cleans the board and returns to the other side of the desk. All rise.

-Good evening, Teacher.

Uniformity now reigns.

These students are more responsive; more competent verbally if not, as I discover later, with written work. But it is very restricted. Seated in two rows, on low benches behind two similarly-common desks, they speak English only to me, straight in front of them. Not for the first time, I ponder how to remove "Teacher" from the learning environment. Space is limited, but by the end of the first week we've fashioned an open area in the centre of the room, and the students sit along the sides facing each other. They are up, talking; we have begun.